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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

Moscow's View of Its Post-War Prospects in Indochina

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
20 February 1973

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Moscow's View of Its Post-War Prospects in Indochina

Summary

Throughout the years of fighting in Indochina, Moscow shaped its policy toward the North Vietnamese and their Communist allies in Laos and Cambodia with close attention to the impact that policy would have on China, the US, and, for a time, on France. Moscow gave Hanoi extensive military, economic, and verbal support, but its commitment was not open-ended because Soviet and North Vietnamese priorities were not the same. In 1954, according to some accounts, the Soviets persuaded the North Vietnamese to accept the 17th parallel as the temporary demarcation line in order to strengthen Premier Mendes-France, who opposed French participation in the proposed European Defense Community, and over the past few months the Soviets encouraged Hanoi to accept an agreement that fell short of its original demands.

As Moscow now charts its role in a post-war Indochina, it will consider what effect specific moves will have on the Soviet-US-Chinese triangle. The Soviets recognize that by themselves they cannot compete with China in the area, and they will therefore welcome the presence of other nations—including the US—in Indochina. They probably perceive the reunification of Vietnam as a fairly distant prospect and have hinted that they may be interested in establishing diplomatic relations with Saigon and would favor US representation in Hanoi. The Soviets would probably not oppose Western economic aid programs and might even break precedent and join in multi-lateral aid projects. Moscow's search for ways to offset Chinese influence in Indochina and the surrounding area is likely to lead to a new effort along the lines of the Asian collective security proposal that party chief Brezhnev advanced in 1969. Although Moscow must guard against putting itself too obviously at cross-purposes with Hanoi, it may well find that, with the war over, it shares some interests in Indochina with the US.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence. It was coordinated with the Office of National Estimates, the Office of Strategic Research, and the Office of Economic Research.

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Background

From the bombing halt in 1968 until 1971, the Soviets were generally able to relegate the Indochina problem to the back-burner. By providing relatively moderate economic and military assistance to the North Vietnamese, and through them to their surrogates in Cambodia and Laos, the Soviets had sustained their revolutionary credentials within the world Communist movement and had checked the growth of Chinese influence in Hanoi. They welcomed that US prestige was damaged by its costly military venture in Indochina; yet at the time of the Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969, they probably derived some comfort from the inhibiting US military presence on China's southern periphery.

Throughout this period, the Soviets tailored their policy in Indochina to fit developments in the Washington-Moscow-Peking triangle, particularly during the period of summitry in 1971-1972. Moscow sought to capitalize on the concern aroused in Hanoi by the Chinese invitation to the President. The Soviets quickly concluded a supplemental military aid accord and in October sent President Podgorny to Hanoi to sign the aid agreements for the following year. Another supplemental military aid accord was concluded in December.

The announcement of President Nixon's visit to Peking also influenced the Soviet attitude toward the North Vietnamese offensive last year. In the spring of 1971, when Hanoi first approached Moscow about aid for the offensive, the Soviets probably opposed military action that would be likely to interrupt or slow the pace of the US withdrawal. After the announcement of the US-Chinese contacts, however, the Soviets apparently became more acquiescent. They probably expected Hanoi to launch the offensive at the time of the President's visit to Peking. Soviet propagandists, at least, seemed to relish the prospect that the President might embarrass the Chinese by ordering the bombing of North Vietnam from his guest house in Peking.

In the end, of course, Hanoi's offensive imperiled not the Sino-US summit, but the USSR's own meeting with the US. The Sino-US rapprochement was a considerable shock to the USSR and galvanized its leadership into world-wide activity to counter the move or at least to minimize its impact. The culmination of the effort was to be the Soviet-US summit; in the Soviet view, that was the only way to put the Sino-US rapprochement in its proper perspective.

In the first weeks of the offensive, Moscow weighed its interest in continued good relations with North Vietnam against its vastly more important aspirations for a successful summit with the US. The Soviets gave

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the Vietnamese only limited propaganda support and continued laying the groundwork for a successful summit. When the US resumed its bombing raids over Hanoi and Haiphong, Moscow reacted by sending party secretary Katushev to Hanoi to urge the Vietnamese to scale down the offensive and resume serious negotiations in Paris. By all accounts, the Katushev mission failed.

Moscow's decision to proceed to the summit in spite of the US mining of North Vietnam's harbors was the most telling example of Soviet priorities, and it brought the Soviet - North Vietnamese relationship to its lowest point since late 1964. The North Vietnamese probably did not expect the USSR to challenge the mining militarily, but they clearly hoped that the USSR would cancel or postpone the summit and provide immediate help in sweeping the mines.

In June, President Podgorny went to Hanoi to reiterate Moscow's strong interest in serious negotiations. He reportedly commended the President's offer of 8 May and urged the Vietnamese to begin bargaining from there. He pointed out that the President was almost certain to be re-elected and that Hanoi's prospects for achieving a favorable settlement would be better before the US elections than afterward. As a measure of Moscow's good faith, Podgorny probably held out the possibility of providing some new weapons—the MIG-21J, the Styx-equipped Komar patrol boats, the ZSU 23-4 antiaircraft gun, and the SA-3 missile system—that have since shown up in the North Vietnamese inventory. He also conferred with the Vietnamese regarding ways to overcome Chinese objections to the trans-shipment of Soviet aid across Chinese rail lines and through Chinese ports.

One factor that made possible Moscow's temperate reaction to the mining of North Vietnam probably was its judgment that the mining could not effectively halt the flow of essential goods to North Vietnam. The bulk of Soviet military aid to North Vietnam had always been delivered by rail across China, and the Soviets probably felt that in light of the changed circumstances China could not hold out forever against North Vietnamese requests that essential Soviet food and petroleum be handled through Chinese ports. The Chinese, however, had no desire to ease Soviet problems with the Vietnamese, and the trans-shipment issue was not resolved until late July. Even so, the Soviets doubtless derived some satisfaction from finding that on this issue, at least, they and the North Vietnamese were ranged on the same side of the problem against the Chinese, and that, vis-a-vis the US, they could no longer be seen as literally fueling Hanoi's offensive.

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The Soviets and the Settlement

Moscow's chief concern over the next few months will be that the cease-fire agreement sticks so that the USSR can get on with rapprochement with the US and detente in Europe. In his speech on 30 January at the dinner honoring visiting North Vietnamese dignitaries Le Duc Tho and Nguyen Duy Trinh, Brezhnev called for strict observance of the cease-fire terms. His remarks were ostensibly aimed at Saigon and Washington, but they clearly were intended for his North Vietnamese guests as well. Brezhnev, furthermore, put Vietnam in perspective by emphasizing the importance of the agreements for international detente generally.

Moscow has long held that a Vietnamese-dominated Indochina is the best hedge against Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia. The Soviets will, therefore, welcome the reference to a single Vietnam in the accord of 27 January. Moscow's treatment of the subject since the accords were signed, however, strongly suggests that it believes a unified nation is a long way off and that in the meantime it can live with two Vietnams. In his speech on 30 January, for instance, Brezhnev urged the North Vietnamese to concentrate on building socialism at home and let the South Vietnamese Communists take advantage of their opportunities to establish a "peaceful, independent, neutral, and democratic South Vietnam." His remarks stood in contrast to those of Nguyen Duy Trinh, who expressed the conviction that the Soviets would continue to support the struggle "which our countrymen in the South are carrying out under the glorious banner of the PRG—the only genuine representative of the Vietnamese population." When the North Vietnamese reported Brezhnev's speech they excised his reference to "South" Vietnam.

Moscow's acceptance of two Vietnams can be seen in the conduct of some of its diplomats. The Soviet ambassador in Vientiane has already inquired about US plans to establish diplomatic relations with Hanoi and Saigon's plans to "seek representation in the socialist bloc."

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Moscow probably expects a lengthy political struggle in South Vietnam. The Soviets will surely take every opportunity to press the US to ensure that Saigon complies with the political commitments made in the peace agreement. Both in terms of its relations with the US and its desire to limit Chinese influence, however, Moscow may consider it has less to lose if political change in South Vietnam comes relatively slowly.

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For the same reasons, the USSR can live with a continuing influential US role in South Vietnam. The Soviets recognize that in any competition for influence in Indochina, geography overwhelmingly favors China and that Russians cannot immediately step in as Americans leave. The Soviets are concerned that in the absence of a significant US presence, the Chinese would be able not only to strengthen their position in Southeast Asia, but also to devote more of their relatively limited assets to the struggle with the USSR.

The International Conference

The Soviets have long held that an international conference in Vietnam should guarantee the USSR's post-war right to be involved in Indochina, and their efforts will be directed to this end at the conference that is scheduled to begin on 26 February. They expect the conference to make it politically more difficult for all sides to violate the terms of the agreements signed on 27 January, and they hope it will increase the momentum toward resolution of the remaining Indochina conflicts. During the conference Moscow may seek to create or exploit differences between the US and France and to vie with the Chinese for the role of champion of North Vietnamese interests. The Soviets will be constrained in these efforts, however, by the desire of many of the parties involved for a short noncontroversial conference.

Moscow's desire for international recognition of its own post-war role in Vietnam makes it almost certain that the USSR will not oppose some kind of continuing role for the conference. The USSR's preference, however, would probably be for an arrangement similar to that provided for in the 1954 and 1962 accords when the International Control Commission reported to the conferrees via the conference co-chairmen. The Soviets are firmly opposed to a role for the UN in the peacekeeping machinery, but there have been some indications recently that they may be willing to countenance a strictly defined role for the UN Secretary General, acting in a personal capacity.

The Soviets probably will not be willing to sign a formal agreement at the conference that would detail limits on US, Chinese, and Soviet military aid to their respective clients in Indochina. Such an agreement in the Soviet view could only harm their relations with the North Vietnamese and would confirm the worst fears of the USSR's other aid clients about Soviet willingness to collude with the US at the expense of the smaller powers. Moscow recognizes, nevertheless, that Hanoi's military aid requirements will be diminishing, and it probably is planning to cut back its military aid. The Soviets, therefore, may offer private assurances to the US about their willingness to exercise restraint in the post-war era assuming, of course, that the US and China show similar restraint.

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In the past, Moscow has been reluctant to take part in international economic aid ventures with the West lest the impact of Soviet assistance be minimized, but Soviet views may be changing, at least in the case of Vietnam. In his speech on 30 January, Brezhnev said that aid to Vietnam "can and must be an act of solidarity of peoples and states regardless of their social systems." The same day a Soviet official at the UN took a US official aside to solicit his views on post-war aid to Vietnam. The Russians said that individual countries would have their own bilateral aid programs, but would also contribute to an international program in which he expected the UN would play an important role.

If the Soviets do agree to participate in an international consortium, it will probably be because they hope that their participation would please Washington, encourage the US to keep the pressure on Saigon to fulfill the political commitments made in the Vietnam agreements, and demonstrate to Hanoi the interest of the great powers in a more stable Indochina. The Soviets may also hope that multilateral aid projects would give North Vietnam, indeed all the states of Indochina, an alternative to dependence on China.

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Laos

Over the years, the Soviets have viewed the Laotian conflict as an appendage to the Vietnamese war and generally have been willing to tailor their policy there to the needs of their North Vietnamese ally. Serving as co-guarantor of the Geneva agreements on Laos has often been as frustrating for Moscow as it has been for the West. The Soviets have held on to their role because the Geneva agreements made it more difficult politically for the US to become openly involved in Lao affairs, provided the framework for a settlement that the Soviets expect will eventually enhance Communist capabilities to gain control of the country, and gave the Soviets some limited room for maneuver with Prime Minister Souvanna's government. As the Vietnam settlement drew nearer, the Soviets became more active diplomatically in Laos. They encouraged Souvanna to believe that the prospects

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[REDACTED]

were better than ever for a resolution of the Lao conflict and sought to initiate a dialogue with US officials on the substantive progress of the Lao negotiations.

Moscow—unlike Peking—has had no permanent presence in Pathet Lao territory since May 1963, when the Soviet personnel that had been involved in the military airlift to Pathet Lao and neutralist forces departed. The Soviets are now attempting to improve their standing with the Pathet Lao. The Soviets have played host to at least three delegations of important Lao Communist officials since last July—including Prince Souphanouvong, who visited Moscow in September for the first time since 1967. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets probably are eager for an early cease-fire accord in Laos. Apart from the benefits they hope to derive vis-a-vis the US, they have every reason to expect Communist battlefield successes to be translated to good advantage at the negotiating table. They also hope that a Lao settlement will increase the effectiveness of the Vietnam agreement and remove the excuse for the continued presence of Chinese infantry, engineering, and antiaircraft troops in northern Laos. Over the years the Soviets have professed to be as mystified as many Westerners about the ultimate purpose of Chinese road-building activity there. Some Soviets have even urged the US to force the Chinese out. The Russians probably are exerting considerable behind-the-scenes pressure to make Chinese troop withdrawals part of any Lao accord. These efforts, however, seem doomed to failure. Souvanna is anxious to gain Chinese backing for the new coalition government and has already indicated that he will avoid discussion of Chinese activity in the peace talks.

Cambodia

Until Prince Sihanouk's ouster in March 1970, the Soviets had sought to prevent the Vietnamese conflict from spilling over into Cambodia. They supported Sihanouk's efforts to maintain Cambodia's independence with small amounts of economic and military assistance and encouraged him to seek a peaceful accommodation with the Vietnamese Communists. When Sihanouk took up permanent residence in Peking, however, the Soviets decided to maintain their ties with Phnom Penh. Moscow's decision stemmed

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primarily from its distaste for supporting anyone connected with Peking. The move did not go down well in Hanoi, but the Soviets have tried to assuage the Vietnamese by giving limited propaganda support and materiel to the Khmer insurgents and by using what assets they have in Phnom Penh to encourage Lon Nol to reach an accommodation with the Khmer Communists. Moscow's decision not to recognize the insurgent government-in-exile seems to be irrevocable so long as Prince Sihanouk remains in China. Its insistence on this point is one of the factors inhibiting an early resolution of the Cambodian conflict.

As in Laos, Moscow has become more active diplomatically in Cambodia in recent months. Soviet efforts have been directed at encouraging the Lon Nol government to bypass Sihanouk and initiate contacts directly with the Khmer Communists in Cambodia. Moscow will continue to work for a Cambodian settlement that favors the Khmer Communists over Sihanouk and his more nationalist-oriented followers, but the USSR's present interest in a more stable Indochina is such that the Soviets are unlikely to oppose any settlement of the Cambodian problem that is satisfactory to the North Vietnamese.

Looking Further Ahead and Farther Afield

The Soviet policy preference over the long term is for the Indochinese states to be in a strong enough position to make any US or Chinese encroachments on their sovereignty prohibitively costly. With the key question of who will ultimately control the political processes in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia still unresolved, however, the Soviets cannot be very optimistic that internal stability in the separate states—to say nothing of meaningful regional ties—will be achieved any time soon. The USSR is probably convinced that the US will not abandon its commitments to the government of South Vietnam and does not expect the various Communist forces to abandon their long-standing goals. The best the Soviets can hope for over the next few years, therefore, is that the political struggle in Indochina will not again explode into war and that both Communists and non-Communists in Indochina will avoid too great a dependence on China.

Looking beyond Indochina, the Soviets probably expect to use the peace settlements to their advantage in at least some other Southeast Asian countries. Although their presence in the area is minimal, they may foresee new opportunities in the more fluid post-war situation. As the Vietnam settlement drew near, Moscow renewed the call Brezhnev first made in 1969 for a "system of collective security in Asia." Since the signing of the peace accord, Soviet propaganda has given the proposal even more attention. The

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Soviets have been no more specific on this question than heretofore, but the move serves not only to put Asian countries on notice that the USSR is concerned over security in the area, but to remind them that, faced with a reduced US commitment, there are alternatives to accommodation with China.

Moscow has adopted a somewhat less negative stance on the question of Asian regional economic cooperation. Most of the kind words thus far have been reserved for the South Asian area, where because of their ties with the Indians, the Soviets might expect to play a dominant role. It is quite possible, however, that Moscow might eventually come to see some advantages in encouraging economic ties between the Indochinese countries and their neighbors in Southeast Asia.

Moscow undoubtedly believes that the principal benefits of the end of the war will accrue outside Asia, most notably in Soviet relations with the US and Western Europe. When Brezhnev said in December at the height of the US bombing of North Vietnam that for US-Soviet relations "much will depend" on ending the war in Vietnam, he at least implied a threat to slow down his detente policy. With the settlement concluded, those who might have been critical of his policy—including perhaps some in the Soviet Union—will be in a weaker position, and Brezhnev may have high hopes of getting on with the "new, substantial steps" in US-Soviet relations that he also included in his December speech.

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